

Chapter 10-A

Things Start Moving

The year 1908 was a memorable one for our family, and especially for me, for it marked my graduation from infancy, shamed by having to wear dresses.

In spite of all our efforts, Christmas had been a pretty lean one, but as March 11 approached, there was a bright prospect: Uncle Ralph, Mother's charming, spendthrift, drunken brother, had promised me a suit for my birthday.

Uncle Ralph was in oil exploration, and was alternately rich (several times a millionaire) and flat broke.^{In his teens} He had lost a leg to "white swelling", thought to be bone tuberculosis, and the whiskey given him for the pain had made him its slave for almost all his life. One swallow and he would drink and gamble until he hadn't a cent of money or credit left. His second wife, Molly Higgins, a homely but patient woman whom he married while on a spree, finally won out, and in his old age he gave me a cane, which I still cherish.

In spite of warnings not to depend too much on his promise, he came through for me, and I'm told my first words on waking on my birthday were: "I want to have pants on."

The year 1907 hadn't been very good to us. The crop on our patch of five or maybe six acres had been poor, and what Father got for teaching a five month country school was very little.

I can't remember ever going to bed actually hungry, but many times our supper --our three meals were breakfast, dinner (at midday) and supper -- was nothing but left-over cornbread and

buttermilk, or some equivalent readily available foods.

Aside from the usual garden "sass", -- beans, turnips, potatoes, cabbage, lettuce, mustard, onions and once, I remember, salsify -- the farm crops were corn, pumpkins and cornfield beans. We had two apple trees, and for other fruit wild strawberries, blackberries and raspberries, wild grapes, service berries, crab-apples wild plums and paw-paws. There were two kinds of wild grapes in the woods: fox grapes, almost as large as the Concord kind, but not plentiful; and 'possum grapes, small and very sour until after frost, but plentiful. We gathered chestnuts, black walnuts, butternuts and hickory nuts to crack before the open wood fire on cold evenings. It was fun to roast chestnuts on a shovel over the fire, and could be done to tell fortunes: Two chestnuts, side by side about two inches apart, were named for sweethearts; if they popped closer together from the heat, all would be lovely; if they popped farther apart, the romance was doomed.

We saved our own seed for next year's planting, and Mother canned as many apples and berries as we had fruit jars to fill. She put up grape juice in any convenient bottles, sealing the corks with sealing wax to prevent fermentation. She also provided it to the church, so as to be able to take communion without ever touching alcohol. Excess beans we either strung on strings to dry as "leather breeches," or ripened and shelled. Pumpkin could be dried in strips, too.

Biscuits, because flour cost money, were strictly for breakfast or Sunday dinner, and once in a while we had pancakes with maple sirup or with hickory bark sirup, made by boiling the tender bark and adding sugar. We also bought some sorghum.

Ernest, Shirley and Walter caught a few fish from the creek (there was a deep hole just across the road from our house) -- suckers (which are good eating in spring) catfish and perch. Mother would also have a special piece of "catfish, because it was easy to get out the bones" for me. Only years later did I learn that for fear I would choke on a bone she had rolled a piece of bacon in meal and passed it off on me as fish. Once in a while we would catch and eat a bullfrog.

Ernest was a natural born hunter and by the time he turned fifteen in 1907 had sold enough hides to make \$4, the price of a sixteen gauge single barrel shotgun from Montgomery Ward, which became his pride and joy. He killed at least one wild duck, several rabbits and squirrels, some doves and quail, and something we called a pheasant. It was probably a ruffed grouse.

With a cow for milk and butter, and one pig to kill in winter, that sounds as if we might have had lots to eat. But ^{seldom} there were/many food scraps to feed to the chickens. We washed the dishes, pots and pans without soap, so as to be able to feed the dishwater to the pig, for slop.

Mother pieced quilts and cut down clothes passed along by cousins, and I think we were about as happy as if we'd had more. But with the approach of Christmas, it was evident that we were going to have a very lean holiday season.

There wasn't much available on the farm to turn into cash except holly and other evergreens, and Mother could make beautiful wreaths. Somewhere she had picked up a correspondence with a Cincinnati librarian named Louise Rowe, to whom we sent

oddities such as a stag beetle and a mole cricket for identification. She found a buyer who would pay ten cents a wreath sent to him express collect. For weeks the house was a buzz of activity and was full of the scent of fir and spruce. In the end we made and shipped out 220 beautiful wreaths. I don't know what the \$2/20 bought, but I'm sure none of us ever forgot the delightful excitement, and the smell of evergreens.

I don't remember much else about Mud Lick except that it was about a mile from the town of Volga, which had a few houses, one church and a store, which housed the post office.

Autumn seemed as if 1908 would be a repeat of its predecessor, when suddenly something occurred which was to change the whole course of our family's life. For some reason, the principalship of the high school at West Liberty, about thirty miles away, had become vacant after the school term was under way. Mother's brother-in-law, Wylie Franklin (I think he may have been a school board member) had put in Father's name, and he got the job, much better than he had previously held.

We made the trip to West Liberty by jolt wagon -- no springs or seats except chairs -- across country on back roads, rather than go around by Paintsville which would have been twice as far. The roads, where there were any, were little more than wagon tracks, and part of the way we had to use creek beds. I think Father and Ernest had taken a previous load.

The weather was pleasant, and halfway along we made a brief halt to eat a lunch Mother had prepared, and broke out a bottle of her grape juice.

It must have been after dark -- I'm sure I was asleep -- when we arrived at a rented house commonly referred to as "the Kendall place," but were there only a short time, I think.

Things were going well at school, looking as if the job might be a permanent, or near permanent one, and Father bought a house and five acres of land, borrowing on his share of his father's estate. The house was small but adequate, with a barn and a fine cornfield in the rear, stretching back to the bank of Licking River. The soil was very rich, half or more of the field being flooded whenever the river was backed up by high water in the Ohio, not far downstream.

We lived there very pleasantly for a while. Mother's favorite brother, Harry Stafford, had given her \$12 to pay for a correspondence course in short story writing, and she was beginning to sell a few stories, articles and poems to Pennsylvania Grit, various church papers and at least one to the prestigious Black Cat. None of them paid very much, but even \$2.50 or \$4 helped, and some she bartered for books she had seen reviewed, a set of teaspoons, or the like.

About the time a friendly editor urged her to use a typewriter she was offered \$10 a month by the Pentecostal Herald, and for a year or more she wrote and edited "Aunt Flora's Corner." This seemed to warrant investment, and after trying out a non-visible Blickens-derfer, we gave \$25 for a used but useful Oliver 3. It was a heavy thing to lug around, but tough, and served all our needs for at least five years.

But things don't always end so happily. At the end of the year the school board decided they wanted someone with a college degree for principal, and hired a man named Poage, demoting Father to assistant principal, though without much reduction in salary, I think. My parents felt we could live with that.

The winter of 1909-10 was a very bitter one, and one night the mercury went down to 12° below zero, Fahrenheit. The walls of our house were thin, and we kept a fire in the livingroom stove all night, and piled coats, clothing and everything else available on the beds. But we lived through it.

Then came the panic over Halley's Comet, and many farmers planted no crops, fearing the end of the world. We had fine views of the comet, but it promised no good for us. Mr. Poage had become very jealous of Father, who was a mathematical wizard and didn't mind letting it be known. As the autumn school term approached, Poage got Father demoted to teach Sixth Grade, at a regular intermediate teacher's salary.

We knew then it was time to go. Father got in touch with Southern Teacher's Agency, whose fee was, I think, half the first month's salary.

Father had little trouble finding another job. Having been principal of a big accredited school was a feather in his cap, and friendly School-board members, who felt he had been given a raw deal, were glad to give him letters of recommendation. Early in November he was offered a position as head of a three-teacher school at Fletcher, near Asheville, North Carolina. In addition,

since I was old enough to go to school, Mother was hired as the primary teacher. Although she had only three or four years of a country school, she had read and studied and easily passed the examination for a teacher's certificate. And so, in a very short time we were on our way to a new life in a new state.